



Fire Season 2004

It was a tough season for the fire and fuels management program. Back in May, our pre-season fire newsletter was full of hope and anticipation for a safe and productive year. While we accomplished many of our objectives, we were also faced with numerous challenges. How did we respond?

Unplanned Fires: Drought conditions leading into the 2004 season pointed to a severe year. To reduce the threat of accidental fires, the parks instituted fire restrictions in mid-June, a month earlier than usual. These restrictions were very successful and, with the public's cooperation, only five acres burned in accidental fires.

Lightning fires were also limited this year due to fewer thunderstorms (19 fires compared to 48 last year). The parks allowed half of these remote fires to spread naturally as *fire use projects* to maintain forest diversity and health (totaling 400 acres compared to 7300 last year). The other half, especially fires discovered early in the season, were suppressed because managers wanted crews available for the dangerous fire season that loomed ahead (but never materialized). Our decision to suppress was a trade-off: it probably minimized smoke in the region but it also prevented the fires from doing their good work.

- Continued

Daniel Holmes - Wildland Firefighter 1978 - 2004

With bright eyes and an infectious laugh, Daniel Holmes was someone who squeezed every drop out of life. But his life was cut short on October 2, 2004,

when the top of dead snag fell on him during a prescribed burn in Kings Canyon National Park.



Top: Dan Holmes in Kings Canyon National Park.
Bottom: Arrowhead Hotshots walk in funeral procession in Rochester, New Hampshire.

Born on January 16, 1978, in Springfield, Massachusetts, Dan moved to Rochester, New Hampshire in 1984 and grew up with a strong love of the outdoors. He appreciated every aspect of wilderness, whether as an athlete (snowboarding, mountaineering, and climbing) or in his academic pursuits in which he earned a B.A. in environmental science from Johnson State College. Combining all these interests, Dan took a job with the National Park Service. He served several years at Mount Rainier National Park as a backcountry ranger, trail crew worker, and wildland firefighter. In 2004, he was a member of the Arrowhead Hotshots based at Kings Canyon National Park.

Dan Holmes is sadly missed by his National Park Service family. For more information about Dan, please visit the Arrowhead webpage at www.arrowheadhotshots.org.

Pile burning is the last phase of mechanical fuel reduction projects. This important work creates defensible space near communities.



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May

- Quail Flat Prescribed Fire completed
- Fuel reduction work finished near Wuksachi Lodge

June

- Ash Mountain prescribed burns completed
- Grant "G" Prescribed Fire attempted but postponed due to fire behavior
- Buena Vista Prescribed Fire completed
- Fuel reduction work finished near Bearpaw Meadow Camp

July

- Tharps Prescribed Fire completed
- Fuel reduction work finished near community of Silver City

August

- Lightning storms started numerous fires across the parks
- Five accidental fires began over a 3-week period prompting the parks to increase the level of fire restrictions

September

- Four lightning fires continued to spread naturally (the largest was 332 acres)
- Sixty acres completed on Grant West Prescribed Fire

October

- Daniel Holmes was killed on Grant West Prescribed Fire (see box on front page)
- Park crews began burning debris piles from mechanical fuel reduction projects

Comments or Questions?

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Planned Projects: The parks finished four of nine prescribed fire projects (approx. 590 acres). One project occurred in Ash Mountain, two in Grant Grove, and one in Giant Forest. The latter project resulted in a citation from the Air District. Due to a disagreement over meteorological conditions at the time, the parks ignited 17 acres without approval to continue a burn that was in progress. The National Park Service is working with the Air District to resolve this matter. A fifth burn, again in Grant Grove, was partially completed. Of the four remaining projects, two did not occur because of dry conditions in the summer and two were precluded by rain and snow this fall.

On a bright note, the parks completed all three

mechanical fuel reduction projects that were planned around Silver City, Lodgepole/Wuksachi, and Bearpaw Meadow Camp. Crews cut excess brush and small trees to create defensible space and reduce wildfire risk for in-park communities. Firefighters have already started burning over two thousand debris piles that were created.

Tragedy: Unfortunately, the season came to a close with the most unthinkable tragedy; a park firefighter was killed in the line of duty in Kings Canyon National Park (see box on front page). In addition to a family funeral in New Hampshire, a memorial service was held in Reedley, California, with approximately 700 guests in attendance. Our interagency partners

are helping with a detailed accident investigation that will be released this winter.

Summary: This year, we were reminded that even well-respected fire programs have challenging seasons. Sometimes projects aren't finished, disagreements strain relationships, and accidents occur. The true test, however, is what we choose to do next. What are our intentions for the future? Our fire program will continue to play a vital role in preserving park resources by using fire at the right times and in the right places. Fire operations will continue to focus on safety. We will help create fire-safe communities and we will work to build strong partnerships with local residents, agencies, and visitors.